



Strasbourg, 17th July 2023

T-PVS/Files(2023)33

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

43rd meeting

Strasbourg, 28 November - 1 December 2023

Complaint on stand-by: 2019/4

**Badger Culling Policy in England
(United Kingdom)**

- GOVERNMENT REPORT -

*Document prepared by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
of the Government of the United Kingdom*



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Horizon House
Deanery Road
Bristol
BS1 5AH

www.gov.uk/defra

Mikael Poutiers
Secretary of the Bern Convention
Council of Europe
F-67075
Strasbourg
CEDEX
France

Our ref: 2019/04
Date: 17/07/2023

Dear Mikael Poutiers

Complaint No. 2019/04: Badger Culling Policy in England

1. As requested by the Bureau, this is an update on the licensed culling of badgers to prevent the spread of bovine tuberculosis (“bTB”) in England.
2. The UK Government’s current badger culling policy continues to be phased out as part of the latest changes to our adaptive bTB strategy¹ and that the **final new intensive cull licences** were issued in August 2022. The licensing of supplementary badger culling is on a downward trajectory and will end in 2025 (see paragraph 8).
3. Additionally, we are pleased to report, that since our previous letter of 21 July 2021, the UK Government’s roll out of badger vaccination in England has accelerated with further expansion in 2023 (see paragraphs 10-12). Along with the deployment badger vaccination, a programme of enhanced surveillance and monitoring is being developed.

Background

4. As we have set out in our previous letters of 28 April 2020 and 21 July 2021, the UK Government is fully implementing the provisions of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (“the Convention”) with respect to the culling of badgers in England. This remains the case.
5. bTB is one of the greatest animal health threats in the UK and the disease causes serious harm to the livestock industry. Last year (between January 2022 and December 2022) 22,084 cattle were slaughtered in England for TB-related reasons.²

¹ Next steps for the strategy for achieving bovine tuberculosis free status for England
(publishing.service.gov.uk)

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/incidence-of-tuberculosis-tb-in-cattle-in-great-britain/quarterly-tb-in-cattle-in-great-britain-statistics-notice-december-2022#:~:text=Total%20animals%20slaughtered%20due%20to,the%20previous%20year%20to%202022%2C084>

6. bTB is a complex disease and there is no single way of controlling it, therefore, we have a package of disease control measures which include:
 - a. Supporting the deployment of widescale badger vaccination.
 - b. Introducing a more sensitive, targeted cattle testing programme.
 - c. Increasing how often we test cattle for the disease.
 - d. Promoting the uptake of biosecurity measures on farms to eliminate the disease as quickly as possible.
 - e. Overseeing the phasing out of the current badger culling policy.
7. We are driving forward an ambitious strategy to eradicate bTB, which includes a range of evidence-led interventions to tackle the disease in both cattle and wildlife. Government scientists are working closely with industry to deploy a cattle vaccine within the next few years and field trials of the CattleBCG and companion test to Detect Infected among Vaccinated Animals (a DIVA test) are underway.

Update on bTB strategy in England

Badger culling

8. Alongside the development of wider preventive measures, we are currently phasing out licensed badger culling in England as wide scale culling was only ever envisaged as a single stage of a long-term strategy. We are currently phasing out wide scale culling and no new intensive cull licences will be issued after 2022 and follow-up supplementary badger culling, under licence, will end in 2025. This means that by the end of January 2026, all culling under the current policy will end. However, the UK Government has retained badger culling as a policy option where the epidemiology indicates it is needed³. Badger culling when used in this scenario would be subject to public consultation.

Badger vaccination

9. In 2022, the Animal Plant and Health Agency (APHA) successfully delivered vaccination in four areas where the intensive cull cycle had ended, with 481 badgers vaccinated over an area of approximately 223 km² in the High Risk (HRA) Area of England. As of 2023, it is also deploying vaccination in a fifth area. This deployment aims to respond to industry requests to assess the impact of badger vaccination on cattle herd bTB incidence, supplementing the evidence base which already exists that the BCG vaccine works in badgers. Meanwhile, we continue to support farmers to vaccinate, providing a new simplified licence and smartphone reporting app, alongside support to help reduce the cost of the vaccine. A recent summary of all badger vaccination in England⁴, showed that 2,434 badgers were vaccinated in 2022, which is an increase from 1,575 vaccinated the previous year.

³ [Bovine tuberculosis: consultation on proposals to help eradicate the disease in England](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/bovine-tuberculosis-consultation-on-proposals-to-help-eradicate-the-disease-in-england) (publishing.service.gov.uk)

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bovine-tb-summary-of-badger-control-monitoring-during-2022/summary-of-badger-vaccination-in-2022#:~:text=Number%20of%20badgers%20vaccinated%20in%20England%20in%202022,-The%20open%20season&text=Licensed%20individuals%20must%20submit%20to,footnote%203%5D%20badgers%20across%20England>.

10. In June 2021, we also awarded £2.27 million (~€2.64 million) to deploy a badger vaccination scheme in East Sussex. The five-year project is coordinated by a local veterinary group and completed its second year in 2022, deploying vaccination over the full project area of 250 km². This demonstrates that a farmer-led approach to badger vaccination is viable and provides a template for large-scale badger vaccination approaches. Badger vaccination is set to recommence in the area for a third year in May 2023.
11. UK Government will continue to provide funding in 2023 to badger vaccination projects aiming to create locally protected badger populations, which can act as a barrier between areas where bTB is present in cattle and areas without bTB. The relevant UK Government Department (Defra) is currently reviewing the scheme and ways to continue supporting similar projects in the future.

Biosecurity

12. As part of the strategy to address bTB we have a comprehensive set of regulatory and administrative measures. Support for, and promotion of, biosecurity continues to be provided by the Government and the livestock industry working in partnership and includes a national TB Advisory Service, herd accreditation programmes and a TB Hub information and advice website⁵. Social research continues to inform our ongoing work to improve/implement improved biosecurity. Whilst there is little evidence to suggest that there is poor compliance with the best practice biosecurity guidance, we are not complacent, and we work hard to influence herd owners to continuously improve their on-farm measures to build greater resilience to the disease.

Cattle vaccine

13. As part of a wide-ranging UK research and development programme, focusing on diagnostics and vaccine development, we are working to develop a deployable cattle TB vaccine using the candidate vaccine CattleBCG.
14. The CattleBCG, sensitises cattle to the tuberculin test, use of which is a fundamental and essential part of our bTB eradication programme. To overcome this challenge, World-leading government scientists in the UK have developed a new DIVA skin test to Detect Infected among Vaccinated Animals.
15. Field trials began in England in 2021 and are on-going. The aim of these trials is to gather information to enable the vaccine and the companion DIVA skin test to be authorised for use in the UK and recognised internationally.
16. A summary of the DIVA test data generated to date at government labs demonstrates that the DIVA skin test shows promising results and has been shown to be effective for detection of infected animals while giving negative results in uninfected cattle (including those vaccinated with BCG).
17. We are engaging with the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). Following successful completion of the field trials we will seek WOAH validation of the DIVA skin test and updates to the WOAH Code and Manual.

Information requests from the Bureau

⁵ <https://tbhub.co.uk/>

Monitoring of the badger culling strategy

18. The 2022 badger control monitoring summary⁶ identifies that, as in previous years, the minimum and maximum cull numbers were updated in some areas as initial estimates of badger abundance (from sett surveys earlier in the year) were refined by actual circumstances observed in the field once badger culling operations were underway.
19. Over the last five years the number of herds in the bTB High Risk Area that have had their Officially TB-free status withdrawn⁷ has reduced year on year from 2,160 in 2017 to 1,053 in 2022,⁸ indicating that our TB strategy is working. In 2022, bTB statistics for England showed decreasing herd incidence in the areas with higher TB prevalence and a very low and stable herd incidence rate in the areas with the lowest TB prevalence (where, apart from occasional discrete hotspots, there is no recognised significant reservoir of the disease in wildlife). In the Edge Area (the buffer zone between the High Risk and the Low-Risk areas), herd incidence rates are decreasing sharply having peaked in March 2021.

Impact of culling on the badger population

20. The UK Government takes the viability of the badger population, and our wider biodiversity obligations⁹ seriously. Badger culling in England is carefully controlled and includes badger control licences and the licensing authority Natural England's (NE) close monitoring of the associated culls. As it has in previous years, the UK Government published its advice to NE on setting and reviewing the minimum and maximum number of badgers to be removed in each licensed cull area⁸ in September 2022. This was based on a carefully considered assessment of the badger population.
21. As we set out in paragraph 23 of our 28 April 2020 response "*The estimated badger populations are based on previous baselines, accumulated evidence and annual sett survey by each licensed cull company to understand the geographic distribution of badger activity in their area.*" Further, it should be noted that the UK Government advice to NE as the licensing authority, specifically states that culling 'needs to "*not be detrimental to the survival of the population concerned*" within the meaning of Article 9 of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats'. We set out how these safeguards are achieved in paragraph 24 of our letter of 28 April 2020.
22. Each year, sett surveys are carried out in cull areas to estimate the population present in each area to ensure that local extinction is not a possibility and to help set the maximum number of badgers to be culled. However, estimating badger populations is difficult, so as an added safeguard, NE monitors the number of badgers culled daily in each area. Follow-up sett surveys, have consistently confirmed the viability of the badger population. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that substantial numbers of badgers are being caught and vaccinated in **post-cull** areas, providing us with confidence that the population is stable (See Table 1).

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bovine-tb-summary-of-badger-control-monitoring-during-2022>

⁷ Official TB-free status of a herd is withdrawn if any animal that tests positive for a TB test has TB lesions discovered at slaughter and/or M. bovis bacteria are cultured from that animal. Or if any animal that hasn't tested positive is found to have TB like lesions at slaughter from which M. bovis bacteria are cultured

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/incidence-of-tuberculosis-tb-in-cattle-in-great-britain/quarterly-tb-in-cattle-in-great-britain-statistics-notice-december-2022>

⁹ [Biodiversity terrestrial and freshwater targets Detailed evidence report.pdf \(defra.gov.uk\)](#)

Table 1: Badgers vaccinated in post-cull areas by APHA in 2022.

Area	Gloucester	Somerset A	Wiltshire	Somerset B	Total
<i>Year</i>	<i>Year 1</i>	<i>Year 1</i>	<i>Year 2</i>	<i>Year 1</i>	
Total Vaccinated	238	21	122	100	481
Total Adults Vaccinated	146 (61%)	18 (86%)	57 (47%)	70 (70%)	291 (61%)
Total Cubs vaccinated	83 (35%)	2 (10%)	59 (48%)	29 (29%)	173 (36%)
Badgers vaccinated of unknown age	9	1	6	1	17
Badgers caught per Km² in post cull areas					
Badgers vaccinated per km²	2.8	0.27	2.8	6.7	

23. Additionally, due to the careful monitoring and safeguards we have in place, we are seeing increases in badger numbers as part of the vaccination work. For example, in a post-cull area in Wiltshire, where APHA has now completed two successive years of vaccination, there has been a year-to-year increase in the density of badgers vaccinated (from 1.2 badgers/km² in 2021 to 2.8 badgers/km² in 2022). This indicates a level of ongoing breeding success in these areas after culling has taken place.
24. Given our on-going monitoring and sett survey work, we are confident badger numbers in all areas of the country remain viable after 9 years of the current culling policy.

Simon Mackown
Head of Species Recovery
National Biodiversity Division, Defra